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Indonesia East Timor Program

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(Peterborough, Canada)

to the

U.N. Special Committee on Decolonisation

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Special Committee:

I am the director of the Indonesia East Timor Program, an organisation for human rights and social justice which was founded two years ago, largely in response to growing concern in Canada's church, development and human rights communities about Indonesia's occupation of East Timor.

At the outset I should like to say that we regard self-determination as the most fundamental of human rights: the basis on which peace and civil rights are founded. It is a right, however, that the women and men of East Timor have been cruelly denied. In December 1975 Indonesian colonialism replaced four centuries of Portuguese colonialism, and it has cost some 200,000 Timorese lives in the eleven years since then. The appalling record of massacre, starvation, imprisonment and torture stems directly from Indonesia's illegal invasion and occupation. And we do not expect this bloody tragedy to end until all concerned nations recognise the right of East Timor's citizens to decide their destiny for themselves, and an act of self-determination takes place.

Unfortunately a great deal of hypocrisy surrounds this noble principle. Indonesia's foreign minister, Dr. Mochtar Kusumaatmadja, has spoken repeatedly and movingly about the necessity of ending military occupation and establishing an internationally monitored act of self-determination in order to restore freedom to a war-torn country. He was, of course, referring to the Vietnamese occupation of Kampuchea, a source of much indignation in Western circles. At the same time he defends the "right" of the Indonesian military to invade and occupy East Timorese land, to execute its men and women at will, and to deprive them of all measure of freedom.

It is not enough to point, as he and others have done, to the huge sums of money which Indonesia claims to spend on Timorese development as an indicator of the regime's good intentions. In the absence of an act of self-determination or any appreciable degree of Timorese liberty, this aid is necessarily directed against the people of East Timor.

The test of true development programmes is whether the recipient area's poor people enrich their way of life without destroying their culture; whether they become less--not more--dependent on government "largesse"; and whether they have control over the way they live their lives. This is not the case in East Timor, where most of the population lives under desperate conditions in resettlement camps under the hostile eye of the Indonesian military; where their native languages and culture are for all practical purposes outlawed; where they are forced--often at gunpoint--to follow the Indonesian administration's orders on where to live, to work and to eat; and where they dare not even protest at this cruel mistreatment.

Indeed, the Suharto regime is none too free with details of its development programme in East Timor, but it is obvious that it is being used to strengthen Indonesian control over the Timorese rather than to help them prosper. For example, an expensive new radio station has been built--hardly essential to the health of East Timorese peasants forcibly relocated in malarial lowlands, although it is seen as valuable to a regime which still thinks it can win the hearts and minds of an imprisoned people. Paved roads are constructed for the convenience of the Indonesian armed forces, whose vehicles cannot maneuvre the dirt trails which generations of tribespeople have been accustomed to use. With malnutrition and disease widespread, the occupiers have taken over enormous stretches of former plantation land, producing export crops are sold to the profit of the local Indonesian authorities. And in the name of social unanimity East Timor increasingly is being settled by Javanese and Balinese transmigrants who are given land seized from the Timorese--who, presumably, will be further "Indonesianised" in the process. By any sane criterion, this is the antithesis of true development.

Similar motives inspire Indonesian restrictions on outside aid or humanitarian organisations operating in East Timor or on foreign journalists visiting the area. When a people is being slowly destroyed it is difficult to hide their suffering; it is much easier to hide the people themselves. Hence the pitiful number of foreign aid groups operating inside East Timor, and then only under severely restricted conditions. And hence the very few foreign reporters permitted short supervised visits of East Timor (and then only those from publications calculated to be sympathetic to the Suharto regime). If the Timorese are truly happy and healthy under Indonesian rule, then what has Indonesia to fear from opening East Timor to unrestricted international scrutiny? If a group like Amnesty International is wrong in its heart-breaking documentation of eleven years of human rights violations, then why continue to bar it from East Timor?

The response of foreign governments--particularly those of the West--to the cries of the East Timorese serves to put into grave doubt our own claims to humanity and reason. It is one thing for the Canadian state to denounce the human rights violations carried out by its Cold War opponents--this involves no loss of investments or trade, but will nevertheless convey to the home electorate the impression of impassioned dedication to liberty. But cases such as East Timor put that dedication to the test. In 1983 Canada became the largest Western investor in Indonesia, a comfortable position further bolstered by a sizeable trade surplus favourable to Canada and the largest aid budget Canada gives to any non-Commonwealth nation. (Canada also became the largest military exporter in the world in per capita terms during the Vietnam War; I am ashamed to say that our arms industry is taking similar advantage of the war in East Timor to sell weapons to Indonesia.) Thus Canada, as is the case with many Western countries, cares a lot more about its earnings from Indonesia than it does about an impoverished black people poised on the brink of extinction.

Nevertheless it is in the interests of the Western world to curb the aggression of the Indonesian regime. Regional peace--already a farcical term, as the 200,000 Timorese dead silently bear witness

--can only be disturbed further as an unchecked Indonesia casts a speculative eye on neighbouring territories. And Western trade and investment is hardly secure when it rests upon the misery of millions of Indonesian workers, whom the regime treats with scarcely more kindness than it reserves for the Timorese. Tyrants cannot last forever, as the fate of Duvalier in Haïti and Marcos of the Philippines reminds us.

Western nations can end the bloodshed immediately if they so choose. They can halt all weapons flow to Indonesia, severing all economic connections with Indonesia, and making aid conditional on an internationally monitored act of self-determination for East Timor. In short, they can tell President Suharto clearly that the Timorese deserve their freedom now as much as the Republic of Indonesia did in 1949, when it emerged from struggle with the Dutch colonisers to a hard-won independence.

The United Nations and its member nations have the obligation to use their considerable influence on East Timor's behalf. In particular, under the auspices of the UN there have been periodic talks between Portugal and Indonesia in order to decide the fate of this small territory. We find it inconceivable that the women and men of East Timor--those most intimately concerned--were excluded. In future we urge that any discussions on East Timor include East Timorese representatives, including members of the independence movement and the refugee communities outside East Timor. Ultimately a properly supervised and internationally accepted poll of all East Timorese must take place in order to ensure a valid act of self-determination.

The Timorese people and their resistance have had scant help from the outside world during the last decade of terror: that is to our everlasting shame. Nevertheless they have managed to stalemate the largest and best-equipped army in Southeast Asia, which says more about their courage and determination to run their own lives than we can ever express. The East Timorese people's fight for their rights must be supported on their own terms, for only they can articulate their true interests. How they are to live is not for us outsiders to decide.

Mgr. Carlos Belo, the Primate of the Roman Catholic Church of East Timor, said in 1984 that "the only solution to the East Timor conflict is a political one, and that this solution should include, above all, the respect for the right of a people for self-determination." Surely enough East Timorese have suffered to demonstrate that violence will not end the conflict. Therefore I urge the international community to act on East Timor's behalf to the utmost of our abilities. No more "quiet diplomacy" when the Timorese are still undergoing a holocaust. Let no more East Timorese souls die at Indonesian hands--and thanks to Western weaponry--because we continue to be passive. For there will be no peace until East Timor has its freedom.